



Characteristics of California school districts in program improvement



Summary



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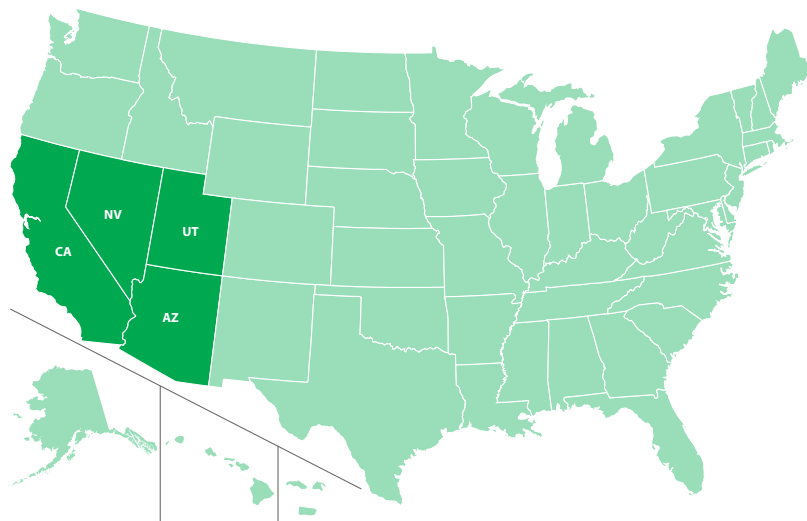
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Characteristics of California school districts in program improvement

This descriptive analysis provides a statistical profile of California's Title I school districts in program improvement. As an independent analysis of these districts in the aggregate, it is intended to inform the context for district improvement as California rolls out and refines its district intervention strategies.

Education policymakers and practitioners in California, as elsewhere, are actively addressing the program improvement requirements of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. They have several years of experience with schools in program improvement and school improvement approaches. But because the district-level element of the education accountability system was phased in later, less is known about districts that have been identified as in need of program improvement, about how district performance under state accountability rules compares with that of their own schools, and about what districts in program improvement might have in common and how they compare with other districts.

This report provides a statistical profile of California's Title I districts in program improvement. As an independent analysis of these districts in the aggregate, it is intended to be a useful source of information to California

decisionmakers about the characteristics of districts in program improvement.

Under the NCLB Act each state must operate a two-level education accountability system, with one level focused on school performance and the other on district performance. Separate accountability calculations are made for schools and for districts, which makes it possible for individual schools to have a different accountability status from their district. To make adequate yearly progress, California districts need to meet as many as 46 individual requirements. California's school districts first became subject to program improvement in 2005/06 if they had failed to make adequate yearly progress in the two previous years in the same content area or accountability category.

A key finding of this study is that the district level of California's accountability system is identifying problems that are missed at the school level. An examination of how California's 961 Title I districts and their 10,290 schools did on individual adequate yearly progress requirements under the NCLB Act reveals that in 2005/06—the year on which the 2006/07 program improvement designations were based—207 districts (78 of them in program improvement) failed to make adequate yearly progress on at least one requirement,

even though all their schools did so on the same requirement. In addition, 24 districts failed to make adequate yearly progress in the aggregate, even though not one school in those districts failed to do so. Regarding improvement status, in 2006/07 four districts in program improvement had no schools identified for improvement.

In these cases the districts were held accountable for certain student subgroups whose performance was not tracked by the school-level accountability rules because there were too few students in the subgroup at each school to meet the minimum subgroup size (100 or more) in California for reporting under the NCLB Act. This occurred most often for the students with disabilities subgroup. While such inconsistencies may appear counterintuitive at first, they reflect the effectiveness of a two-level accountability system—with the district-level system picking up, monitoring, and being accountable for students missed by the school-level system.

In 2006/07, 159 (17 percent) of the state's 961 Title I school districts were in program improvement. These districts served more than 2.6 million students, or 42 percent of all public school enrollment. Close to half the students in districts in program improvement were also enrolled in schools in program improvement (1.2 million). Compared with the state's 802 districts not identified for program improvement, the districts in program improvement were larger on average, with more schools and students, and were more frequently located in urban

settings. But although districts in improvement had a greater proportion of large districts than did districts not identified for improvement, some very large districts were not identified for improvement. In fact, half of the largest districts in the state (5 of 10) were not identified for program improvement in 2006/07. California's districts in program improvement also tended to have higher proportions of Hispanic, Black, English language learner, and socioeconomically disadvantaged students.

Moving forward, California's districts in program improvement face substantial challenges. Only 22 of the 159 districts in program improvement made adequate yearly progress in 2005/06, and statewide proficiency targets were set to increase again in spring 2008. Compared with other districts, districts in program improvement tend to have more English language learner students and students with disabilities and are more likely to be held accountable for the test performance of these subgroups. Moreover, among all districts that are accountable for these two subgroups, districts in program improvement have disproportionately failed to meet the proficiency targets for the subgroups. California's new intervention process for districts in program improvement, the District Assistance and Intervention Team, which will have increased prominence in the state's district improvement efforts over the coming years, emphasizes improved services to English language learner students and students with disabilities.

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